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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the challenges in the improvement of research and development that arise from the commonality, rather than differences, in producer and consumer perceptions. The paper is based on the assumption that although producers do have varied incentives for engaging in and using research, their key motivation is a desire to improve schooling. Three approaches to enhancing that mutual interest are addressed--building a client-based research agenda, viewing research utilization as an educational improvement enterprise, and developing organizational forms for research that enhance ties with consumers. Examples related to educational policy research are offered. A conclusion is that although attention to enduring concerns, such as the need for improved resources, is important, the three alternative approaches offer potential for improving schooling through research. (Contains 37 references.) (LMI)

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CONSORTIUM FOR POLICY RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

# Uniting Producers and Consumers:
## Challenges in Creating and Utilizing Educational Research and Development

Susan H. Fuhrman

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## Biography

**Susan H. Fuhrman** is a professor of educational policy at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She also serves as director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE).

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# Introduction

Discussions of the perspectives of producers and consumers of educational R&D frequently focus on their differences. We are told that researchers and practitioners operate on different timelines, use different languages, and respond to different incentive systems. Researchers bring a problematic perspective to the study of educational policies and practices; practitioners and policymakers want to know what works rather than what doesn't. While users want clear answers, researchers focus on complexity. Researchers tend to ask incremental questions that build on existing theory and knowledge, but policymakers and practitioners pose larger questions about potential actions and seek answers from a variety of sources, including but not limited to research (Birman and Kaufman 1991; Weiss and Buculavas 1980; and Dunnette and Brown 1968, Glaser and Taylor 1973, Duncan 1974, Caplan 1977, Dunlop 1977, Dunn 1980, Rothman 1980 as cited in Beyer and Trice 1982).

Preoccupation with differences in perspective, even when it is acknowledged that generalizations mask significant variation in both the producer and consumer communities, restricts discussions of the challenges facing educational R&D to a fairly standard list of frequently rehashed problems. For example, a major concern in this country is the lack of support for basic research (NRC 1992). Any discussion of the need for more studies directed at building fundamental knowledge and theory surfaces the tension between those researcher priorities and practitioner needs for more applied studies. Similarly, the low level of U.S. governmental funding for all educational R&D, both basic and applied, relative to other functions or to private sector research (National Education Goals Panel 1991, NRC 1992) can be related to the perspective gap. The differences in perspectives between researchers and practitioners can be used as an explanation for low funding; if users and consumers were more closely attuned, research would have more impact on practice and more political credibility. And, increased funding can be viewed as part of a solution to the perspective gap because it would broaden participation in R&D, supporting linkers,

intermediaries and brokers who would bridge the distance between academics and practitioners. This is not to argue that increased funding for basic research and for R&D in general is not central to improved R&D in this country. It is. However, there are also other approaches to improving the creation and utilization of R&D that may receive somewhat less attention because of the tendency to focus on the different world views of researchers and consumers.

In this paper, I will focus on challenges in the improvement of R&D that arise from the commonality, rather than the differences, in producer and consumer perspectives. I start with the assumption that research producers and consumers share a desire to improve schooling and are willing to devote time and energy to that effort. Many may quarrel with my assumption, returning to "different world" motifs like researcher preference for publishing in inaccessible academic journals or client ties to the status quo. I will simply posit that among the varied incentives for engaging in and using research is a desire to improve schooling and that for many researchers and consumers, including the vast majority I have met in connection with OERI research and dissemination activities, it is the key motivation. I will address three approaches to enhancing that mutual interest: building a client-based research agenda; viewing research utilization as an educational improvement enterprise; and developing organizational forms for research that enhance ties with consumers. In the course of discussing these challenges, I will draw most frequently on examples related to my particular field, education policy research, and to the primary audience for the kind of research I do, legislators, governors, board members and other education policymakers. However, I hope that my thoughts have relevance to other aspects of education research and to practitioner audiences as well.

## Building a Client-Based Research Agenda

The notion of focusing research on "issues that are relevant, timely and important" (Weiss and Vickers 1992, p.1098) is so common sensical and so well supported by studies of utilization that it is often taken for granted. The assumption is frequently made that because research is generally focused on key levels of education, such as early childhood or adult education; pressing student problems, such as social or economic disadvantage; or enduring structural issues, such as how schools are best organized and financed, that it tracks to consumer concerns. However, within each general topic arise many specific questions, some more compelling to users than others. Also, consumer concerns change over time, even over the course of a single research project. Finally, diverse consumers have varied uses for research and varied needs depending on their specific contexts. Understanding client needs is a complicated business if it is taken seriously.

As complicated as understanding client concerns is, the process of building a client-based research agenda is even more challenging. Building an agenda that is relevant is only part of the story. Certainly, research on relevant topics is more likely to be used. But one wants research to be used, not for the sake of having it used, but for the sake of improving schooling. Therefore, research has to be not only relevant, but promising of payoff in that it pushes on the boundaries of current knowledge or frames it in ways that enhance understanding, policy and practice. The core of client-based agenda setting is a negotiation process that marries client concerns with researchers' views of the "ripeness" of research topics. Taking client needs seriously involves significant investment of time on the part of both researchers and users in the negotiation process, which is why strong mutual interest in educational improvement is the foundation for such endeavors.

Clients and researchers first negotiate specific topics within general areas. For example, a specific topic within the general field of school finance might be "interdistrict equity" or financial disparities among school districts. Both clients and researchers are likely to respond to temporal factors that make certain topics more critical than others, such as current litigation on interdistrict equity in courts in 23 U.S. states. Policymakers look to researchers for guidance on how to respond to this new round of court decisions; researchers know that these decisions are redefining the field of school finance in a way that must inevitably shape their agenda.

Topic consensus is only the starting point; then the discussion turns to the aspects of the topic that need addressing. Consumers may look to researchers to understand the dimensions and extent of interdistrict inequity, to clarify the conceptual bases for various approaches to the problem, and/or to provide empirical evidence on the effects of various formulas and funding approaches. Their interests may vary depending on how, and on the extent to which they are aware of how, they will use the knowledge—to enhance conceptual understanding, to apply to decisions in an instrumental fashion, or to strategically legitimate decisions already made, to borrow Michael Huberman's (1987) classification.

In the interdistrict equity example, the standing court decisions and the arguments in a number of pending cases push in the direction of school finance remedies that go beyond equalization of dollars among school districts to equalization of services. For example, cases in New Jersey, Texas and Kentucky used extensive data about ranges in school program and practices as evidence for determining that school finance systems permitted unconstitutional inequities. Hence, policymakers are becoming interested in ways of measuring program equity and in how dollar inputs translate into different levels and types of service provision. Researchers want to investigate those areas that have payoff in terms of advancing knowledge, areas where previous research has suggested additional levels or modes of investigation, surfaced or emphasized new problems, highlighted the need for replication or for designs that enhance generalizability and the like. So in the case of "interdistrict equity," many

researchers want to go beyond the studies of taxing and spending inequities and formula effects that have been conducted extensively in the past. Researchers want to focus on how dollars translate into programs in various settings and what kinds of program measures can be used meet alternative definitions of equity.

In the school finance example, a priority on conceptualizing program equity meets the needs of both clients seeking school finance improvement and researchers desiring to refine and enhance their field. Undoubtedly, the external pressure provided by the courts is a key factor in forging consensus. When external factors are less obvious or missing, reaching agreement about specific topics may be more difficult, among consumers in different settings and roles as well as between researchers and consumers. However, a full history of the interdistrict equity example would also take into account how previous research on the limits of pure dollar equity influences plaintiffs and judges in framing cases. A full rendering would consider how policymaker concerns about program equity extend beyond the courts to more generalized worries about the relationship between school improvement and school finance, reflecting doubts raised by previous research on education productivity. So, the picture is considerably more complicated than the simple story of court intervention. A more complete rendering probably brings the example closer to many other areas of educational research. Previous research and client needs over time interweave, suggesting that in many areas of research there is an intersection of client needs and "ripe" areas for investigation that negotiation between clients and researchers can surface. The challenge is to establish a process that enables the negotiation.

There are undoubtedly many research activities shaped by interaction with clients. I am familiar with two examples of client-based agenda setting that suggest how such processes might be constructed. In the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), which I direct, a multi-tiered governance structure provides for an iterative

process of client-researcher topic determination.[1] An Executive Board, or national advisory panel, comprised of elected and appointed policymakers and other participants in the policy process provides perspectives on important research issues and advice on framing our research so that it is most useful to policymakers. Twenty-six national associations that are formally affiliated with CPRE represent the range of constituents—the key policymakers and the practitioners and interested participants who compose the education policy community. The associations, which range from the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and the State Higher Education Executive Officers to the National Governors' Association and the National Alliance for Business, provide important advice about the information needs of their members. Research and Dissemination Advisory Committees, composed of outside experts from state and local research agencies as well as universities, advise on research designs and emphases that respond to the suggestions of the Executive Board and affiliated organizations. A management committee of CPRE researchers uses the accumulated advice to make final determination of research topics and approaches.

The interaction among the various advisory bodies and CPRE staff takes three primary forms. First, at formal meetings of the Board, advisory committees or affiliated organizations, we present overviews and emerging findings of research in progress with the purpose of encouraging debate about further questions raised by current research. Second, we frequently ask advisors, usually with advance warning so that they can prepare, to spend a few minutes each reflecting on emerging policy issues and problems. Third, any time we are presenting research findings—to advisors or to policymakers we encounter through dissemination activities—issues raised in discussion or question and answer sessions may suggest interesting research angles.

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[1] A somewhat longer version of the discussion of CPRE's agenda-setting approach is found in "Center for Policy Research in Education: An Overview," in Weiss, Carol (ed.), (1992), *Organizations for Policy Analysis*, London: Sage Publications.

As a result of the consultation, CPRE's policy research agenda has evolved much as policy itself has changed. In 1985, two years into an extensive state education reform movement that stressed state-level policy solutions to problems of school improvement, our agenda focused heavily on new state standards for students and teachers and ways of measuring progress that resulted from such standards. That work continued through 1990 so as to provide longitudinal studies of the effect of standards, but we also developed new projects as a so-called "second wave" of education reform, focusing on school-based change and de-emphasizing state mandates, began to take shape. In 1987, we began several studies of the changing roles and responsibilities of teachers, administrators and policymakers around school-designed improvement. By 1990, when a few leading states moved to set ambitious outcome goals for students and to coordinate state policies, including decentralizing efforts, around the outcome goals, CPRE's agenda had similarly come to focus on combining the two waves of reform into a more coherent, systemic reform approach.

The second example of client-based research agenda development is OERI's approach to a congressionally requested evaluation of education reform.The work is described as "a deliberate collaborative effort between the federal government and potential users of the results of (the) research." (OERI 1992). Collaboration is intended to lead to research that is targeted on important, practical issues, and framed and conducted in a way most suited to those interested in using it to influence practice. At the initial stage of the effort, representatives of practitioners, policymakers, business leaders, parents and others interested in education reform were convened to consult on the specific topics that would comprise the research. Twelve topic areas, such as assessment of student performance, parent and community involvement in education and school uses of time, were identified. OERI published requests for proposals for the 12 studies; researchers responded with specific designs they felt most advanced knowledge within the topic areas. Then OERI again called on users to review proposals and make recommendations about contractors. Similar advisors will review draft reports and other products to assure that they are crafted in

meaningful ways. Associations representing practitioners, policymakers and other clients have been asked to assist in disseminating the knowledge derived from the studies.

Since both examples concern policy research, the conclusion might be drawn that client-based agenda setting is relevant only to applied research. However, in both cases, some of the research shaped in response to client advice is more basic than applied. CPRE conducts research on decision-making processes in governmental institutions; one of the questions all 12 OERI studies are to address concerns the sources of information used by reformers. These areas could easily be classified as basic political science research on political processes. Perhaps, as MacRae (1987) suggests, an appropriate term for research responsive to user needs is "problem-oriented" research. Various research approaches can be marshalled to address specific problems. Consultation with consumers about which problems are of interest and what they need to know about the problems might enhance all phases of R&D agenda setting, from program planning by funding agencies to the shaping of specific research projects, for all types of research.

## Utilization as Educational Improvement

A second aspect of strengthening the bonds between research producers and consumers around improved schooling entails more attention to how knowledge is used. The research on utilization is quite clear: the meaning of research is constructed by the user (Lindblom and Cohen 1979; Huberman 1987, 1990; Weiss 1977, 1980; Weiss and Vickers 1992; Miles 1992; the Network 1992; Tushnet 1992). In understanding its relevance, individuals translate research findings through the lens of prior knowledge and understanding, making sense of new knowledge in the context of their daily activities. If the knowledge has an effect, it is to alter views of those activities or the conduct of those activities. Knowledge use is therefore learning and

change. Both producers and consumers need to work on the conditions that promote learning and change in schools, and in other societal institutions that affect schools, if knowledge is to be used. As the recent National Research Council report on education research puts it, research use is education reform (NRC 1992).

The education research community should be at the forefront of using research on research use to inform R&D, since it is research on learning that is the foundation of understanding knowledge utilization. We should be the last to offer simple access or supply-side solutions to promoting utilization and the first to view use as a complex change process in which "getting the research out there" is only the first step. Perhaps this increasingly sophisticated understanding of knowledge use is taking hold. For example, when members of the research community testify on research impact in Congress, we speak not only of changed practice but of changed ideas and we stress the long period of time it takes for knowledge to permeate and take hold. However, we could do much more to take the constructivist view of knowledge use seriously. At least two approaches to improving R&D along these lines occur to me. First, we should focus more on the context of knowledge users, and second, we should strengthen the integration between research and dissemination.

## A Focus on the Context for Knowledge Use

If research is meaningful only in the context in which it is used, the R&D community needs improved understanding of various contexts and of the interaction between research use and setting. One way to achieve better understanding is to support the replication of studies of instructional strategies or practices in varied contexts. Replication is urged by many scholars of research utilization because findings take on more force when their generalizability is enhanced, when they have been confirmed by several researchers and when they have been refined through a number of iterations (see, for example, Fox 1990). One of the effects of low support for research in this country is that, when tradeoffs need to be made among research topics needing

funding, repeat studies frequently loose out to more glamorous "new" studies. The failure to fund repeat studies means that we lose the opportunity they provide to strengthen findings and to improve the likelihood of impact as a result. In vicious cycle fashion, lack of strong impact undermines research funding and lessens the opportunity for conducting repeat studies. Replication is also important, however, because it provides more guidance about the conditions supporting utilization. By studying the effects of interventions in a multitude of settings, we can learn more about the interaction between setting and the intervention. We will better understand the aspects of context that affect the results of the intervention and therefore be able to offer better advice about what changes might be necessary to support the intervention. If practitioners receive guidance about how best to support research-based improvements in specific contexts, the chances for meaningful and sustained change might be enhanced.

Another approach to greater focus on the context of use concerns more attention to system issues as research topics. It seems clear that if using research to improve education is change, system factors affecting the will and capacity to change are important issues. Much current research in the U.S. examines the incentives and supports or barriers and constraints for change, at each level of governance and practice. For example, policy researchers attend to political, economic and institutional factors that shape policy decisions; researchers in the field of administration and leadership look at the policy, bureaucratic, and organizational context for administrative decision-making; scholars of the setting for teaching and learning look at the school as a workplace and the classroom as a social-instructional system. But these studies rarely present a complete picture of system supports for improvement, for several reasons.

First, researchers tend to specialize on a certain level or element of the system; collaboration among such specialists is relatively rare. While many researchers collaborate with colleagues, including those representing other disciplines, to compare contexts for change—for using knowledge to improve practice—across types of

classrooms, schools, communities and policy settings, including other nations. collaboration among researchers who specialize in different contexts is less frequent. Although there are some instances of such cooperative studies (see, for example Cohen and Ball 1991), it is unusual for researchers focused on classroom learning to work together with organizational specialists or policy researchers to understand the range of context influences on student learning. Much of the discussion of R&D focuses on the different paradigms of research producers and users; perhaps it would be more productive to spend some effort considering how the different paradigms of researchers constrains our ability to get a more complete understanding of the context surrounding knowledge use.

A second reason that many current studies fall short of providing adequate knowledge of the system surrounding research use is that most research is crafted around a few aspects of context. In general (and again there are exceptions) we study one, or perhaps a few related, policies; administrative decision-making or leadership under certain well-defined conditions; classroom settings for particular types of activities. We do this for two reasons: we need some way of managing complexity and crafting reasonable, "doable" research; and rarely is funding sufficient for large-scale, multi-level, multi-site research of broader scope. Researchers strive for focus to make their tasks manageable, and funders press for focus so they can spread scarce resources among many projects.

In the U.S., concerns about confidentiality and legal restrictions on federal data gathering limit what we can learn about the context of schooling from our largest national assessment and data collection effort. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assesses the achievement of students in key subjects, gathers data about classroom setting for learning from teachers, and permits links between student and teacher data and school-level data collected from the principal. Since 1990, data about students, classroom practice and schools can be reported by state, and therefore the state policy context can be taken into account in analysis. However, no data is collected by school district. Nor are schools selected to be

representative of the district, so an information about an important source of influence on practice and achievement is missing.

More support for research might make more large-scale, multi-dimensional research that permits a fuller understanding of context possible. In the interim, one way to compensate for the limited understanding provided by numerous focused studies might be to orchestrate them, or at least those supported by one funder, so that they focus on the same sites or same data bases over the same period of time and provide pieces of information that could be aggregated. Another tactic would be to promote synthesizing activities to capture what is learned from numerous, independent slices.

A third problem that inhibits our understanding of the complete system influencing change is our tendency to focus on "new approaches," an issue alluded to earlier under the discussion of the need for replication (See Fullan 1991, for discussion of the emphasis on innovation). In this nation, we frequently approach research much like we approach education policy, as a series of disconnected projects, each one promised as "the answer." (Smith and O'Day 1991; Cohen 1990). We shape research as if the next "innovation" or "new approach" is likely to provide the clue to educational improvement that has eluded us up till now. We act as if we did not know that many past research-based approaches fell short of expectations because of issues surrounding use—not because they were not promising in and of themselves. We keep searching for the next great hope, while we should be focusing on what we would do if we found it. More attention to the system surrounding change—for example, to the factors that give teachers the time and incentive to use research findings—would be as valuable as the most promising improvement strategy. Focusing on how to make the system work in support of innovation seems at least as important as discovering innovations, although the former is less glamorous and perhaps less attractive to funders.

To recap, a number of factors related to the funding and conduct of research limit our ability to understand the system surrounding and influencing research use.

However, one approach to more focus on the context for use requires no shift in the way studies are designed or in the way research agendas are shaped. The research we currently have on school change and policy implementation, as limited as much of it may be in shedding light on systemic issues, could be mined for information about research use as well as for information about change processes and effects.

Most education policies are also theories about improving education. For example, policymakers set class size limits because they believe lower class sizes facilitate instruction. They require that certain courses be offered, set minimum levels of qualifications for teachers, provide support for school-based planning and fund staff development programs based on similar beliefs about what works. Often these beliefs reflect research evidence, even though the policymakers may not be aware of it or even though they may be over or mis-interpreting actual findings (Huberman, 1987, 606). For example, many of the state-level reforms of the 1980s requiring more academic content reflect earlier research findings on opportunity to learn and expectations that found their way to policymakers' agendas through the extremely popular report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* (Fox 1990). Studying the implementation of policies—the translation into practice of these pieces of "knowledge"—is one approach to the study of research use. Because aspects of policies other than their substance, such as whether they are mandates or incentives and how they interact with patterns of intergovernmental relations, compound with the substance and frequently attract our attention, we may pay less attention to the knowledge use aspect of implementation than we might. The conclusion is simply that we have many sources of information about knowledge use in various contexts that we may be overlooking.

## Strengthen Integration between Research and Dissemination

If context and knowledge use are so intertwined, it follows that researchers interested in the use of their findings should understand the contexts of users. Not only should the research community focus more on context in their research, but researchers should also attend to the specific context of interested consumers. They can best do that by playing a strong role in the dissemination of findings, rather than turning the dissemination role over to others.

Huberman (1989) calls the necessary interdependency between research and dissemination "sustained interactivity." He defines it as "multiple exchanges between researchers and potential 'users' of that research at different phases of the study." (p.9) These phases include: (1) before the study is conducted, where scope is negotiated and the target public's preexisting knowledge is assessed; (2) during the study, where members of the target public are involved in reviewing findings and determining how findings might best be presented; and (3) during analysis and write-up, when a dissemination plan is developed and the implications of the findings for challenging local norms are examined. However, the most intense period of interaction, observed in many cases of utilization, occurs when "the study findings are brought directly to the user organization."(p.10) During this extended period, findings are translated into more operational forms, and researchers and consumers work together on determining alterable variables and discussing various aspects of the context of significance to the user. Links formed through sustained researcher/user contact are important predictors of use (Huberman 1987).

Yin and Moore's (1984) studies of 9 R&D projects on natural hazards led them to conclude that social interaction, "the existence of active social networks of research investigators and researcher users," (p.3) was the best explanation of utilization. Communication between researchers and users were "two-way and highly interactive"

and occurred throughout the life of the project (p.6). Their conclusion is so strong that they made a point of underlining it: "...a major finding was that research utilization begins when R&D begins, and is not a sequential step that only follows the R&D." (p. 6).

The importance of researcher-consumer interaction is certainly relevant to research use by policymakers. Policymakers value personal discussions with researchers, face-to-face. They are inclined to listen to those they know and trust (Nelson and Kirst 1981; Van Horn and Hetrick 1987), suggesting that sustained interaction is of benefit. If no source of information is available in their own settings, they turn next to their associations, also considered trusted sources (Fuhrman and McDonnell 1985). Researchers from "out of state" take on credibility when they are known to the associations or to instate researchers and/or when they personally spend time in the policymaker's setting working through findings.

Findings about the benefits of interaction suggest that the research profits when it is well-grounded in context and that utilization is more likely when the users develop personal relationships with researchers. Therefore, researchers should be involved in dissemination, which itself should be seen as an activity that spans the research process. Interestingly, both the current Senate and House bills to reauthorize OERI, as well as the National Research Council report on OERI, propose to keep dissemination essentially separate from research, placing it in a separate office or directorate. All three plans would support some form of intermediary or linking activities to promote utilization, collaboration between research activities and the dissemination division, and the inclusion of some applied research activities in the dissemination or outreach office. Also, all of the sponsors would probably applaud active dissemination activities by researchers coming under divisions devoted primarily to research. However, the organizational charts send a powerful message, one which could work over time to divorce rather than integrate research and dissemination, to the detriment of utilization.

A constructivist view of knowledge use suggests more focus on the context of use and more interaction between research and dissemination. Both ends could be enhanced by greater proximity between researchers and users. The third approach to building on common researcher/user interests in improved schooling is to develop new organizational forms for research that feature such proximity.

## New Organizational Forms for Research

Two emerging forms for educational research increase the contact between researchers and users. One is collaborative research, inquiry conducted by researcher-practitioner teams. The second is the consortium form for research centers or large projects, which spreads research activities geographically over sites close to many, varied practitioner settings.

Collaborative research projects, sometimes called action research, involve practitioners and researchers working together as a team. The work is sustained, beginning with project conception and continuing through design, data collection, analysis and application of findings. Such activities are challenging to design and maintain since they involve busy people who have varied incentives for engagement. However, those who have participated in collaborative projects give them excellent reviews. Among the benefits are better focus on problems important to practice, enhanced validity of instruments and analyses, improved presentation of findings and greater authority for findings. Teacher participants feel less isolated and are likely to become more reflective about their practice; researchers gain improved understanding of the complexity of the instructional process. All partners profit from enhanced insights about other participant's activities and roles (Ward and Tikunoff 1982; Oakes; Hare and Sirotnik 1986; Porter 1987; Atkin et al. 1989).

In contrast to what appears to be expanding interest in collaboration among researchers and teachers, there seem to be few, if any, examples of researcher-policymaker team efforts. Policymakers frequently advise research projects of all

types. Staff in our consortium have undertaken joint research with staff of policymaker associations. However, teaming with policymakers for sustained, joint inquiry that extends to all phases of research is rare. The reasons are interesting to ponder. Time does not appear to be the major barrier. Many teachers find it possible to engage in collaborative inquiry although they are as busy as policymakers, and their time is less flexible. More likely, the policymaker-researcher division of labor is more firmly established and socially embedded than is the case with teachers and researchers. Researchers are often university faculty, and so, like school faculty, they teach; they engage in the same line of work, so to speak. Also, the creation of collaborative projects with teachers is often a deliberate mechanism to change the social conditions of teacher's work, to diminish their isolation, enhance their engagement, and the like. No one has undertaken to change the conditions of work for policymakers, although given the ills of the American political system, attention to that issue might be beneficial. In any case, collaborative inquiry involving researchers and policymakers seems like an intriguing idea, one I'd like to try.

The organization of research activities as multi-site, geographically spread activities is another way to enhance contact with a variety of clients and to improve understanding with varied contexts. Not all types of activities or research missions lend themselves to geographic dispersion. But for some it works quite well.

The Consortium for Policy Research in Education's operation is greatly enhanced by our consortium structure.[2] The location of the six institutions in different geographical regions facilitates dissemination and collaboration with regional, state, and local actors; it also lowers the cost of conducting research that is national in scope. Furthermore, as CPRE researchers had extensive prior experience in education policy analysis, they brought to CPRE well developed contacts in their state and regional policy communities. Our national consortium structure enables us to build

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[2]A more extended discussion of CPRE's consortium structure is found in "Center for Policy Research in Education: An Overview," in Weiss, Carol (ed.), (1992), *Organizations for Policy Analysis*, London: Sage Publications.

on, expand and unite localized networks. In fact, one can argue that a national education policy center should be a consortium rather than a single institution because regional dispersion enhances understanding of and access to various policy contexts.

Since understanding and interacting with diverse contexts might benefit many types of inquiry, the consortial structure has relevance beyond policy research. Furthermore, modern communication technologies overcome many of the drawbacks of geographic distance. Some may worry about integration of research conducted across a variety of sites. In my experience, coherence is likely to rest as much, if not more, on conceptual integration and the shared vision of like-minded colleagues than on physical proximity. Since colleagues at various institutions collaborate because they choose to, and not simply because they find themselves at the same place, they are likely to hold compatible beliefs about research and educational improvement that provide a foundation for cohesion.

## Conclusion

If an R&D system is to address the perspectives of producers and consumers of research, a good starting point is their shared interests. Arguing that producers and consumers share a desire to improve schooling, I have urged that discussions of producer and researcher needs focus on opportunities to cement that interest. Attention to enduring concerns, such as the need for improved resources for R&D, is important. However, three other approaches—building a client-based research agenda; taking guidance from a constructivist view of knowledge use; and developing forms for research that bring producers and users closer together—also offer potential for improving schooling through research.

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